

THE MYSTERY OF GRASLOV

By Ashley Towne

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CHAPTER XIII. A TERRIBLE SITUATION.

THE palace of the governor of Tomsk was brilliantly lighted, and carriages crowded the plaza before it. Gayly uniformed officers and fashionably attired ladies passed from them into the spacious rooms. The governor himself was at his best and was proud of the beautiful relative for whom he had given this suddenly arranged reception.

Princess Olga, who had slept much of the day after her wearying experiences of the night before, showed no effects of her exhaustion, but received the guests with that calmness, that queenly style, which was all her own. The garrison band blared its Russian music, and the atmosphere in the rooms was laden with perfume. It was a strange and motley gathering, but Olga, who had traveled much in strange places, as well as in centers of civilization, looked upon the crowd with complacency.

A colonel of cavalry, with his handsome wife, when they came to greet her was followed by a Cossack chief clad in the barbaric splendor of his rank. A Manchurian mandarin, with a long sword on one side and a short one on the other, wearing his native dress, marched with the crowd, a distinctive figure. He had come to Tomsk to confer for his government with Neslerov concerning the crossing of the border into Manchuria. The new railway brought to Tomsk mighty men from places never before heard of by many who lived in Tomsk.

A Persian prince who had but the day before arrived from Tobolsk, where he had spent a week studying the convict system—a system impossible to his country—added his gorgeousness to the throng.

If Olga was surprised that at so short a notice so great a gathering could be summoned in that Siberian capital, she gave no sign. She accepted the homage as one who was born to it. Young officers vied with one another to be near her. Grizzled veterans looked at her and smiled, for it made them glad to see so lovely a princess at Tomsk. By far the most distinguished looking man in the throng was the colonel of cavalry, whose wife had long been a semi-invalid. He found time to devote some attention to the princess while his wife rested from the weariness the excitement brought upon her.

Olga, whose travels had given her a clear insight to human character, singled Colonel Barakoff out at once as a man of sterling integrity and a fearless soldier. To him she was extremely gracious, and encouraged him to talk, and he was proud of her attention. When the dancing began, the crowd scattered through the palace, and it was not long before Colonel Barakoff and Olga found themselves sitting in a retired spot with the colonel's wife.

"It is the first time in my experience," said the colonel, "and that has not been a short one, that one of our noble ladies has condescended to visit our capital. And now one of the powerful house of Neslerov is here. It causes wonder that she would forsake the pleasures and gayeties of St. Petersburg for this dismal place."

"I have seen enough of St. Petersburg gayeties to last for a time," answered Olga. "My life is not all spent in pleasure. I am not yet your age, colonel, but I have learned that to be happy and to be contented with oneself one must find some work to do, and do it well."

"You are very young," said the colonel slowly, "and very wealthy to have found that out. I, of course, learned it long ago, but my age is three times yours. You say you have found pleasure in work. Would it be presumptuous to ask what work has found favor in your eyes?"

"Presumptuous? Not at all, colonel. I am always pleased to talk with one who is able to appreciate it. I have become thoroughly convinced that there are faults in our social system. I am neither a nihilist nor a socialist, but I do think that the wealthy nobles of Russia are not doing their full duty to those who, it is true, are dependent upon them, but upon whom also they are dependent."

"It is a bold stand for a young woman to take. Men have been sent to Siberia for those sentiments."

"And the sentiment sent me to Siberia, but not under sentence. I have come partly to visit the governor, who is a relative, and more than that, to study the convict system as worked out under his rule in Tomsk."

The colonel became cautious.

"You will find plenty to study," he answered, "but I fancy you will not proceed rapidly. Our system—well, it is the same, I suppose, as that in vogue at Tobolsk."

"Perhaps it will prove so. I am acquainted with Count de Muffo, governor general, and I know that, while he is a stern man, he is just. When he can be merciful without lending an apparent aid to the unworthy, he does not hesitate to show leniency. I hope I shall find the same spirit prevailing here."

The colonel smiled grimly.

"Shall you, then, write a book upon the penal system?"

"I may do so, although that is not yet one of my plans. I may tell you in confidence, however, that I have the entire confidence of the czar and that he is interested in the outcome of my studies."

"In my youthful days we did not hear of such things," said the colonel. "A young woman who at your age and with your wealth and position took



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upon herself so great a task would be sent forthwith to a lonely castle and kept a sempiternous."

"I fear that some of that same spirit dominates our society today."

"I think it will prevail for a time."

"Where would you advise me to go to study the convict system at its worst?"

"Its worst? Do you not wish to see it at its best?"

"I understand it at its best."

"Well, it is a serious matter to advise, yet if you are working under the protection of the czar we must help you. I should say Tivolofsky."

"I shall go there. Where are your prisons?"

The colonel rubbed his grizzled mustache.

"We have guardhouses in all settlements."

"Dungeons?"

"Not many dungeons. There are dungeons under this very palace, but they are obsolete. I do not think they have been used in years."

"Then they could be inspected."

"I see no reason why they should not. But that would be for the governor to say. Shall I ask him?"

"No; since they are under his palace I shall have an opportunity later. I suppose they are entered by way of a secret door."

"There was a door at the end of the police offices," replied the colonel. "Of course, being a soldier, I know scarcely anything about them. They are wholly in charge of the police."

"But you formerly had no police in Siberia save the Cossack guards."

"True, but I was not at Tomsk then. I came here from Tobolsk."

Olga spoke then to the colonel's wife, and the subject of the dungeons did not recur.

Neslerov came and presented a young officer, a member of a noble family, and he asked Olga for a waltz. She thanked the colonel, and they did not meet again. The dancing continued till a very late hour, after which there was a supper served with the true Russian prodigality. Olga was becoming weary, but she maintained her usual spirits. She chanced to pass near the governor and heard a young officer speaking.

"Lieutenant Demsky is not present. Whom will you name as the lieutenant of the palace guard?"

"None will be necessary," answered Neslerov. "Itzig will be at his post. As it is nearly morning, no more will be necessary. Dismiss the guard, take them to the banquet hall and give them supper."

Soon after that Olga found occasion to cross the hall to the offices of police. People were passing to and fro, and no

one could think it strange that the princess went where she pleased. She found at the end of the suit of rooms devoted to police affairs a small apartment, the door of which was closed. Turning to see that Neslerov was not in the hall—she did not care for the guests—she entered. Sitting there in lonely state was a man. He was not particularly agreeable looking and seemed to be of a stupid order.

"Are you not being feasted with the others?" asked the princess.

"No; they forget poor Itzig," was the reply.

"What is your duty here?"

"To guard the door to the passage yonder. Stupid! No one could enter. The key never leaves the pocket of the superintendent of police."

Jansky had been constant in his attendance at the bottle and already showed the effect of his heavy potations.

"You shall not be overlooked," said Olga. "I will send you some refreshments."

She first went to her room and returned to the banquet hall. She ordered one of the servants to open a fresh bottle of wine, which was done. Then a tray was prepared, and she ordered it taken to Itzig. Quickly, without a second's delay, a small vial in her hand was emptied into the wine.

"Take this also," she said.

When she returned to the throng, the guests were leaving. They came in throngs to bid her adieu, and she saw the last one leave. Jansky, Neslerov and the servants were left.

"I am exhausted," said Neslerov. "I feel completely worn out. And you, cousin, must be weary also."

"I am," she answered. "I shall not be long getting to sleep."

"Nor I. I hope you enjoyed your ball."

"Very much. I thank you for the kind attention. And now good night."

"Good night."

"I'm going, but I shall first make a round of inspection," said Jansky.

"There being no guard this morning, it will do no harm. It will not be daylight for two hours."

They parted, and Olga went to her room, but not to sleep. Therese was asleep in a chair, waiting for her mistress.

"Therese?" said Olga.

"Oh, pardon me! I was asleep," said Therese, starting up.

"Hush! I do not wish any one to hear us. I have work for us both to do."

"I am ready. Command me, princess."

"I know, faithful Therese, but this is work that will require all your nerve. Listen. The ball is over and the guests have gone. Chance has favored us tonight. It has enabled me to plot and plan for what we are to do. Neslerov dismissed the guard, and there will be in a short time no one awake in the palace. The superintendent of police carries the key to the dungeons, and he is now half drunk. The door to the dungeons is guarded by a stupid fool named Itzig. I found him at his post, and sent him a bottle of wine and tray of food. Into the wine I poured that vial of toothache medicine I obtained from you. It is enough to make any one sleep for hours. Where Jansky sleeps I do not know; but we must find him. We must wait—it is too soon—but in half an hour it will be safe to descend. Jansky said it would not be daylight for two hours. That will give us an hour and a half to work."

"And that work?"

"To release the American and Vladimir from the dungeons and send them to old Pauloff to get him to safety. He must not be harmed, for we want his testimony."

"Good!" said Therese, with a shiver. "It is grand—but dangerous."

Olga opened a traveling bag and took therefrom a silver mounted revolver.

"I do not wish to kill," she said; "but if we are discovered there will be trouble, and I must succeed. Come now, for the honor of the Neslerovs and the house of Graslov!"

The princess opened her door and peered into the corridor. The lights were still burning as brightly as during the ball, but no one was in sight.

"Come—all is silent as the grave," she said. "Even if we meet some one, it will not cause suspicion."

She led the way, and Therese, shivering with terror, followed. The great stairway and hall were deserted, but from the little guardroom at the end of the police quarters there came the sound of curses.

"Stupid blockhead!" said the voice of Jansky. "Drunk! Who brought him this bottle of wine?"

With a quick motion Olga whisked Therese into the same room where she had crouched to listen to Jansky and Unsgethup. There came the sound of unsteady footsteps. Jansky, with the unfinished bottle of Itzig's wine in his hand, went drunkenly to his office.

"I'll finish this—then go to bed," he muttered.

He finished it, and it finished him. It was not ten minutes before his own eyes closed in that terrible sleep from which he could not arouse himself until the effect of the drug had passed off.

"Come!" said Olga.

Nervously and quickly she rifled the sleeping man's pockets and found a bunch of keys. Swiftly, then, these two rushed to Itzig's room and, shutting the door, barred it on the inside.

"Now we can work without molestation," said Olga.

She tried several keys in the lock of an iron door that formed part of the rear wall, but without success. Finally she found one that turned the rusty bolt, and the door swung open. This door led into a small passage, in which there were various articles—lanterns, whips, chains and weapons. Olga quickly chose a lantern which showed it had been recently used and lighted it. At the end of the passage was an iron grating forming a door, and this, too, she unlocked with Jansky's keys.

Beyond this was a flight of stone steps leading downward, and then all was darkness. Olga, holding the lantern above her head, led the way down the steps. The stones were cold and damp and slippery as she neared the bottom. The dark atmosphere sent a chill through her, but the brave girl did not falter. Therese came creeping after her, shivering with fear. They did not count the number of steps, but knew there were many. At last they stood on a cold stone floor.

"Now, which way?" she asked, holding the lantern to flash its light as far as possible around her.

She could see that they were in a large chamber from which various passages broke away in every direction. "We must not linger—to lose time would be to lose the game," she said. "Choose this passage and follow it to the end."

She turned into the nearest passage, and the gleams of the lantern were reflected from slippery walls. As she walked she examined these walls for

doors. There were arches that led to other passages and smaller ones that opened into chambers that had evidently been once used for prison cells, for chains were hanging on the walls.

The lantern in Olga's hand flashed its light into every nook and cranny until at last she reached the end of that passage. Making sure Therese was close behind, she turned her steps into another passage, running apparently at right angles with the other. This she traversed in the same way until the very hush of the place and its silence began to awe her.

The first courage that had led her to the desperate act gradually gave way to the awful gloom and mystery of the place. But in its stead there came a determination not to relinquish the search until she had found the unfortunate victims of Neslerov's hate or proved that they were not there. She walked on, gradually increasing her pace. A door at last greeted her vision—a real door that swung on hinges.

"At last, perhaps," she said.

She tried her strength against the door, and though it was not locked, yet she could not open it sufficiently to enter.

"Therese, help me," she said, setting the lantern down upon the floor.

The two placed their shoulders against the door and pushed, and it suddenly opened. Therese was precipitated headlong into the chamber. A rush of foul air almost stifled Olga. There was a peculiar sound, as if Therese had fallen upon a heap of something. She was whimpering in her terror.

Olga seized the lantern and dashed into the chamber. A cry of horror escaped her. She was in what seemed to be an old tomb. At least, there were heaps of bones scattered about, and into one of these poor Therese had pitched headlong.

Olga swung the lantern and, near to the spot where Therese lay, two skeletons hung in chains. One had lost its head, but the other, by reason of being fastened in a peculiar way, had retained its grinning top piece.

Therese was in a dead faint.

Olga was now in a terrible difficulty. She knelt by the side of Therese. "Oh," she said, "if I had but some water! She will never recover in this place."

Setting the lantern down, she dragged the woman from the place of horrors and laid her down on the cold floor of the passage. Then she swung the door shut.

Again she began working over Therese. Olga saw that she was suffering a severe nervous shock, and the only hope of restoration of her senses was immediate removal from the place.

Swinging her lantern upon her arm, she seized hold of Therese and began dragging her along the passage, going backward in order to exert a greater pull on the unconscious woman.

In some way—she never knew how—she lost her bearings and came suddenly against a great stone pillar which stood in the center of a sort of court, from which passages ran like the spokes of a wheel.

For a moment she stood there half unwilling to believe the truth. Then, as the horrible fact was borne in upon her, she let the shoulders of Therese lie neglected on the floor while she stared helplessly around her. She could not discover the one through which she had come.

She was lost!

[To Be Continued.]

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